DAVID AND GOLIATH
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Psalm 4
Mark 4:35–41
1 Samuel 17:32–49

"You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him;
for you are just a boy."
1 Samuel 17:33 (NRSV)

Who is going to tell you who you are?
Is it going to be power, money, some institution,
or is it going to be God? If it is God,
you don't have to prove yourself at all.
All that is taken care of. You are precious,
you are unprecedented, you are irrepeatable,
and you are indispensable.
So you don't have to prove yourself.
All you have to do is express yourself.
What a different world it would be
if all we felt called on to do was to express
the beautiful selves we are made
and meant to be by God.

William Sloane Coffin
"A Baccalaureate Sermon"

As you silenced the storm long ago,
so, O God, now silence in us any voice but yours.
The waters of our souls are troubled; some of them are stormy.
Settle us down, and in the calm silence of this time together,
speak your word to us: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Ruby Bridges, a six-year-old African American girl, was the first student of her race to attend the all-white William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans in 1960. She has been in my personal constellation of heroes and heroines ever since. Norman Rockwell painted one of his most popular *Saturday Evening Post* covers about the day: the crowds of angry white adults, faces contorted with hate, shouting at a little black girl; four burly

federal marshals; and in the middle of them, little Ruby Bridges in a white dress, pigtails, white socks and shoes, carrying a book, on her way to defeat a giant—the powerful giant of school segregation and the centuries of racism behind it.

Also in that pantheon of heroines and heroes is Jackie Robinson. I have a photograph of him in 1947 crossing home plate after hitting his first major league homerun. He was the first African American to play major league baseball. He broke a strong color barrier in this nation, and nothing in major league sports has been the same since. My father, who was not a crusader for equal rights, knew that history was being made when Robinson appeared in a Dodger uniform and wanted me to see it. So in 1948 he took a rare day off work. We rode the train to Pittsburgh—he wore a blue suit, white shirt and tie, and a straw hat, I recall—and we went to Forbes Field to see the Pittsburgh Pirates play the Brooklyn Dodgers, with Jackie Robinson at second base, the first black major leaguer. He warned me that people might boo and say mean things, and they did.

Ruby Bridges and Jackie Robinson: two individuals who took on huge, established, deeply entrenched powers and overcame them, defeated them; one a gifted athlete in his early twenties and the other a little six-year-old girl, not unlike a young boy back on the edges of history who took on a giant one day and won.

The story of David is one of the best in the Bible, much too long to fit into one sermon. David is Israel's greatest king, brilliant politician, and military strategist; brave, compelling, attractive, and so altogether human that it's almost embarrassing. And he started out as a nobody.

David was chosen to be Israel's next king by the prophet Samuel, with God directing Samuel. Samuel's instinct is to choose the biggest, strongest candidate. God restrains him with the wonderful advice "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

Samuel anoints young David to be king in the future, but Israel is in trouble now, engaged in a war with the neighboring Philistines. The two armies are eyeing each other warily from encampments on opposite mountains, with a broad valley between. You can visit the site in modern Israel and pick up five smooth stones, which I did and carried in my pocket for awhile. The story is a good one, full of excitement and tension and violence. It is not a story for the faint of heart. In a scholarly analysis of the story of David and Goliath, Walter Brueggemann says children love this story because they live in a world full of big, intimidating, and oppressive giants.

David's older brothers are in the army. David's job is to bring them lunch every day. One day, from the Philistine camp comes a lone soldier. He's big—very big. He wears a helmet, breastplate, and shin guards. He has a spear and a very big sword. His name is Goliath, and the very sight of him strikes fear in the hearts of the Israeli soldiers. He issues a challenge to King Saul's army: "Choose a man and let him come down to me," he shouts, standing in the middle of the valley. "If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants; but if I prevail against him and kill him, then you will be our servants. . . . I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man that we may fight together."

Everyone knows how this is going to come out. Goliath is big, strong, fierce, armed to the teeth. For forty days, Goliath walks down the mountain and shouts challenges and insults. And for forty days the soldiers of Israel quake in fear, wringing their hands, talking among themselves about how terrible and hopeless this all is, amplifying the fear by their talk, which has now immobilized them, Brueggemann says (*David's Truth*).

David can hear and see what's going on. So he volunteers. "I'll fight him," he says. His brothers scold him for his silly impudence. The king himself delivers the line: "You are not able to go against this Philistine; for you are just a boy." David assures the king that God will protect him, as God protected him against bears and lions when he was watching his father Jesse's sheep in the wilderness. Saul is out of options. No one else is stepping up, so he agrees to let David try. He insists that David wear his, the king's, own armor. But it's too big and too heavy. When David puts it on he can't even walk, let alone fight.

So down the mountain he goes with his slingshot and five smooth stones and his confidence in God's protection. The fight itself is over before it gets started, like those heavyweight fights people pay a lot of money to see and that end with a flurry of punches in the first round. David moves quickly, runs, slings a stone, Goliath falls, the Philistines flee.

I was fascinated to read an essay in the May 11 *New Yorker* by bestselling author Malcolm Gladwell, "How David Beats Goliath: When Underdogs Break the Rules." Gladwell, who sells a lot of books about business, argues that David won because he broke the conventional rules of engagement: he ran, didn't approach slowly, carefully, circling, watching. He ran, unencumbered by conventional armor and weapons. He ran right at his opponent. David won because he was smarter, quicker, more nimble, and wasn't afraid to think outside the box. Gladwell says that when David does that, Goliath is easy.

The most delightful part of the article was about Vivek Ranadivé, a software developer from Mumbai, and his twelve-year-old daughter's basketball team

he agreed to coach in Silicon Valley. Vivek didn't know the first thing about basketball, but he could see that his team wasn't much compared to the urban playground basketball teams they had to play, loaded with tall, expert dribblers, passers, and shooters. His players, he told Gladwell, weren't good at all, were "little blonde girls from Menlo Park who worked on science projects, read books, went on ski vacations with their parents, and dreamt of being marine biologists."

Vivek didn't know anything about basketball, but he is smart, and he made several simple and astute observations about the way the game is conventionally played. A basketball court is ninety feet long, he observed. But the game is played intensely in about twenty-four feet. The other seventy feet are conceded by the defense to the team with the ball. What if you played intensely, the whole court, all the time, contesting every pass, even the inbound pass, which initiates the action? So that is what his girls did: pressed, just like David. Vivek broke another conventional rule of the game. He did not guard the player inbounding the ball, which gave him an extra defender to trap, and he positioned his girls in front of, not behind, the player they were defending, defying another basketball convention. His girls began to win, beat everybody in fact, and so disturbed the pattern of play that coaches of bigger, much more talented players started to complain, until his team was forced to revert to conventional basketball and promptly lost.

There is a great story in the tale of David and Goliath. Part of it is about the power of individual courage and deep love, which expresses itself in commitment.

Ruby Bridges remembers the day she walked alone, six years old, into an all-white school:

> The morning of November 14 federal marshals drove my mother and me the five blocks to William Frantz. One of the men explained that when we arrived at the school two marshals would walk in front of us and two behind. . . . It reminded me of what Mama had taught us about God, that he is always there to protect us. "Ruby Nell," she said as we pulled up to my new school, "don't be afraid. There might be some people upset outside, but I'll be with you."
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> Sure enough, people shouted and shook their fists when we got out of the car. . . . I held my mother's hand and followed the marshals through the crowd, up the steps into the school.
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> The next morning my mother told me she couldn't go to school with me. She had to work and look after my brother and sister. "The marshals will take good care of you, Ruby Nell," Mama assured me. "Remember, if you

> get afraid, say your prayers. You can pray to God anytime, anywhere. He will always hear you."
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> That was how I started praying on the way to school. The things people yelled at me didn't seem to touch me. Prayer was my protection. (http://www.rubybridges.com/story.htm)

A young Harvard pediatrician and child psychiatrist, Robert Coles, became interested in what was happening in New Orleans and the psychological and spiritual effects the school desegregation experience would have on the children and went to New Orleans to study it. He stayed and studied and wrote about Ruby and the other children, one of whom was another six-year-old, Tessie, and her grandmother, Martha. Coles was present in the kitchen one morning when Tessie announced that she didn't want to go back to school, to the screaming crowds, and Coles heard her grandmother say,

> It's no picnic child—I know that, Tessie—going to that school. Lord Almighty, if I could just go with you and stop there in front of that building and call all those people to my side and read to them from the Bible and tell them, remind them, that he's up there, Jesus, watching over all of us. . . . But I'll tell you you're doing them a big service, you're doing them a great favor. . . .
>
> You see, my child, you have to help the good Lord with his world. He puts us here and he calls us to help him out. You belong in that school, and there will be a day when everyone knows that, even those poor folks—Lord I pray for them, those poor folks out there shouting their heads off at you. You're one of the Lord's people. He's put his hand on you. He's given a call to you.

Cole reports that "Tessie finished her breakfast, marched confidently to the sink with her dishes, put them in a neat pile, and went to get her raincoat and lunch pail, without saying a word. She was going to school" (*The Call to Service: A Witness to Idealism*, pp. 1–4).

I imagine David like that, like Ruby and Tessie—small, vulnerable, walking out onto the field to confront Goliath, absolutely sure of the rightness of his cause, absolutely sure that he was not alone.

The truth of the story is that those things happen. Little six-year-old girls overcome centuries of racism and the laws of the state, walking through crowds of adults whose faces are contorted with hatred, cursing, spitting, threatening; little girls saying their prayers.

Or a young, gifted black athlete taking on the strong and powerful racism of professional baseball, promising the general manager of the Dodgers, Branch Rickey, that he would endure, would not strike back. When Rickey asked what he would do if an opposing player or fan hit him in the face, smacked him on the cheek, Robinson said, “I have two cheeks, Mr. Rickey.” Members of his own team signed a petition saying they would not step on the field if he were playing. Opposing pitchers threw at him; base runners slid into him spikes up; fans shouted obscenities. Jackie Robinson quietly, magnificently endured, alone, and won. He was helped by a white shortstop from the South, Pee Wee Reese, who refused to sign the petition and extended his hand.

David and Goliath is a wonderful story, but it is more than a story. It contains truth about reality, about God; truth about a God who is always on the side of the oppressed and marginalized, a God who can be counted on in the struggle against injustice—maybe the most important truth in the world. As I looked at the paper this morning I couldn’t help but think about what is happening on the streets of Tehran today as thousands of university students and women confront a very powerful political establishment. President Obama said about the demonstration, “Martin Luther King Jr. once said, ‘The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.’” They may not win this skirmish, but they will prevail, because God is always on the side of the oppressed longing to be free.

And it is a very old story about an important truth—that God goes with us, walks beside us whenever we step out onto the field to go up against a powerful and intimidating foe.

Walter Brueggemann says Goliath is a symbol for everything that is fierce and intimidating and frightening. So let Goliath be whatever threatens you, whatever makes you feel small and weak and vulnerable, whatever immobilizes you. When you find yourself in a situation like the disciples of Jesus, in a boat in the middle of a storm so powerful you are paralyzed by fear—

- the disease you just learned about and now need to confront and contend with
- serious surgery you are facing that understandably makes you afraid
- the loss of your job or the threat of unemployment, which is undercutting your confidence and self-esteem
- the very difficult challenge of finding a new job, getting up every day and, in spite of one rejection after another, submitting your resumé, showing up prepared for yet another interview
- the never-ending demands of parenting your children
- the loss of a friend, a loved one, a dear one

- the daily diminishment of aging, a very real giant

then let Goliath be whatever immobilizes you in fear—fear of the future, fear of intimacy, fear of failure, fear of risk, fear of extending yourself, stretching yourself, fear of loneliness.

Let Goliath be that final enemy—the power of death itself—and the fear behind every other fear; the fear of what the philosophers call nonbeing, which intrudes regularly into our consciousness, the fear of death in every human heart.

I was called to Mankato, Minnesota, this past Thursday, to be part of a memorial service for the thirty-six-year-old brother and brother-in-law of two Fourth Church families. He was a wonderful young man, an orthopedic surgeon who twice a year traveled to Africa to perform surgery on children with congenital spine abnormalities. He was an avid mountain climber and bicyclist who loved his life and his family. He should have lived a long and productive life. He and his companion died when they fell 2,000 feet while climbing Mt. McKinley.

Every minister who finds himself or herself in that situation agonizes over what to say. We all do. What possibly can we say that would be the slightest bit helpful? It was with gratitude that I was able to turn to a psalm to read to that family and congregation, a psalm attributed to David, a poem he perhaps composed years later in his own old age as he sat reminiscing, as the old do, thinking about, reliving that harrowing, frightening day long ago when, as a young boy, he stepped out onto the field to face the champion of the Philistines; a psalm to keep close to your heart in every moment of fear and threat; a “Psalm of David,” the Bible says. We know it by heart. We say it at Communion. Say it with me now, a Psalm of David:

> The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
> He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
> he leadeth me beside the still waters.
> He restoreth my soul:
> he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.
> Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
> I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;
> thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
> Thou preparest a table before me
> in the presence of mine enemies:
> thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
> and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.